

Journal of Nathaniel Faust, Curse-breaker and Master of Mystic Science

2 Feb. 20-

A Union of Souls! I'm usually not one for weddings, but there really was no argument here—I love her. My life would be over thousands of times over by now without her; oh, sweet Rel, what have I done? I swear I will find a way to make things right; nobody should have to pay with their soul because of their partner's foolishness...

"WHAT'S LOVE GOT TO DO, GOT TO DO WITH IT? WHO NEEDS A HEART WHEN A HEART CAN BE—" I threw my book at the radio across the room. The music stopped before I heard any crash.

"Ow! Now if ye're nay goin' sleep in yer bed, ye should nay be so upsed when ye ge' woken up," the nagging voice of an annoyed Irish lady accompanied the THWOMP! that was decidedly not the sound of August's Twelfth Testament hitting a Philco 350T, "I swear, if ye don't star' taken care yerself, I'll jus' take me thins an' go." Having just thrown my pillow at my only friend, and realizing I was now trying to sleep with my cheek directly pressed upon the fire grate, I reluctantly pulled myself out of the fireplace, proceeding to yawn and stretch out my neck. Fireplaces, while generally well-insulated against sound and cold, can have the effect of making one's neck stiffer than most places to sleep.

"Well," I could tell my resident alchemist was extremely ticked off from having one of the last great (secret) works of the Milesians sect thrown at her, "maybe if people had some common decency not to play the radio at," I searched the windows to see how high the sun was, "what time is it?"

"Abou' four thirdeh," she glared at me, "afternoon."

Oh. I thought, we're in for it now, she's gonna kill us. It's the—

"I though 'ye cared abou' me enough ge' up on Imbolc," a pale tear rolled out from her kelly green eye as she turned around and paced out of the library, slamming the doors behind her and causing the wood to grow and fuse with a snap of her fingers. I now had no way out—I'd left my coat somewhere (probably my study or the parlor), and without my blue or lighter I had no chance breaking her enchantment. Even if I managed to smash the doors apart, they'd just grow together again before I could run through them.

"That's what we get for staying up all night," I sighed at my reflection in the polished stone of the fireplace. I went over to the radio and picked up the book from the floor. Maybe August had some way of breaking a Celtic oak enchantment. About an hour into my renewed study, that is, nearly two hours from when Imbolc would start in earnest, the radio started crackling with an almost hymnal static.

"Rel!" I called out through the door, "it's starting!"

Nothing.

"Rel?" I banged my fist against the door. She wouldn't miss it. Even if she had to face down another swarm of demonic rams, she'd be here for the semiannual broadcast from Emain Ablach. The static began to coalesce into voices, songs. Spells. Rel wouldn't miss the spells, they were the source of her entire being. I shoved my whole body against the door, yelling at the top of my lungs. It was no use. How could she miss it? Was she really that upset that I slept in? The voices were becoming clearer and clearer; reciting the chorus of eternity. If Rel missed it, she'd start losing her voice again.

She couldn't miss it.

I wouldn't let her.

I snapped the cross off my rosary, inverting it into Peter's cross. Blood red flames swirled from my palm, encompassing the beads and surrounding the cross.

"INFERNII!" I commanded, reducing the enchanted doors to a pile of ash with a single word. I collected the floating Crest of Satan, reverting the cross and sealing my cursed blaze back into my palm with the rosary, and dashed through the hall, asking the house where she was. The spirit of the house didn't know. She'd left the property through the front door after she stormed out. I wanted to curse, but having only just resealed the blaze it didn't seem like a good time. Where are you? I wanted to scream. I found myself back in front of the library; the house wanted to show me something.

There she was. That voice on the radio. Like a crystal stream running through a dappled forest.

*There was no time to waste. I ran across the hall, asking the house to take me to my coat. It was in the parlor. Of course it couldn't be in the study—it had the key in it. Also no time to check the pockets—had to make it in and out of the Otherworld before nightfall. Fortunately, I keep a vial of her blood, just like she does for me. We can find each other anywhere in the universe with them. She wasn't *IN* the universe, but she had been until leaving. I sprinted like mad up the stairs, throwing the vial at the stained glass window tinted like the Earth; then threw myself into it as well.*

I emerged in a dense forest. The song of the fae was all around me—hidden in the slight breeze whistling past, the little spring bubbling up, the birds chirping in the trees. An ancient gnarled hazel tree stood in the middle of a slight clearing of sorts, its roots enveloping a small arrangement of stones. What modern archeologists would probably call a Neolithic hut of some kind, but the ancient Celts knew was really a marker for the doorway to the Otherworld. Now to just get inside. If Rel's voice was coming from the Emain Ablach Otherworld, I would need to open the apple doorway. Which tree was the apple tree? In February it's so hard to tell. The one with the red berries was clearly the hawthorn, so the apple must be... I walked slowly around the

clearing, carefully inspecting each tree. Too short. Too old. Too tall. Evergreen. Wait; a whiff of woodsmoke there. I pressed myself against the trunk, opening my inner eye and listening intently. There! A shimmer, and the sound of voices. Here was the apple tree, and Avalon was just on the other side!

"Droichead," I whispered, knocking the trunk thrice, wishing I knew more druidry to be able to tell if I was doing it right (note to self: actually *READ* The Trials of Merlin instead of just the Eternal Wanderer's interpretation). Nothing happened. Of course it didn't. I slumped down in defeat. I had nothing that could move trees; no wand or flute. Not even a contract with any being who specialized in trees.

"My, my, a little man, has he got no other plan? He seems so sad, sad as can be, can he not get into this tree?" an impish laugh resonated around the clearing, accompanied by an aura of... something powerfully ancient, yet wholly familiar.

"Who's there?" I whipped around, scanning the treetops for another figure. With my luck, the Cheshire Cat was about to pounce and rip my clothes to shreds.

"A pleasure, sir, my name is Puck, and you, my friend, seem rather stuck," the voice was moving around the glade. Now far away, now right at my ear, "can you not see with those eyes brown, the form of one mere faerie clown?" He appeared. A tall, pale man with long fingers, blond hair, and a sharp face twisted in a smile that reached his bright green eyes. A rarity in my business. He wore light green pajamas, and held a sort of flute in his right hand. I couldn't shake the sense that he was some kind of animated scarecrow-like creature, meant to keep humans away from the Otherworld.

"Did you say Puck? Like in *Midsummer Night's Dream*?" I backed away, keeping him at a steady distance. My left hand dropped towards my blade. Or, rather, where my blade usually was. Curses!

"Ah haha! Old Willy Shakes! Yes, I gave him all his big breaks; he needed a pen and something to write, and wandered in one midsummer's night," the thing was suddenly at my shoulder. I pivoted away, but he wasn't there anymore.

"Ok, sprite, can you help me, or are you just going to mock me?"

"Help you," he popped down from the branches of the tree behind me. Clearly there was no way to avoid him in this dell, "Mr magic man? Oh, but yes I surely can, but first I'll need something from you: a promise to help poor Puck too," he made an exaggerated frown, but, since still hanging upside down, it had the effect by purely guile to form another cunning smile. Gah! Now I was rhyming.

"Help you with what? And could you stop rhyming, please?" this question made him burst out laughing for some reason.

"No more rhymes, do you mean it? I don't think I have a peanut," he fell out of the tree and curled up laughing, "The Princess Bride—oh ho what fun, but surely you should want this done. The sun's almost down all the way, I think you know how ends this day."

"Can you please answer the question?" I was losing patience fast, and not just because he was right that I was losing twilight fast.

"Not a clue, what shall you do? I've naught I want that you possess, a favor's all I need, say yes?" He gave a deep bow, but even with his eyes closed and turned downwards I could feel his gaze. There was only one way out of here.

"Ok, I mean, yes," it's always best to answer specifically when dealing with powerful beings, "I accept your terms," I bowed back, "give me a way into the faerie realm."

"Splendid that you took my bid! Your soul I'll take, don't fear, I kid. Your gift to me will come anon, it's payment fulfilled ere comes the dawn," he held out his flute, "and now this pipe I urge you

take, should you wish to enter Apple's Lake, to seek the lady oh so fair, for whom you hold so high a care," I took the flute from his hand. It hummed with magic.

"This is it?" I couldn't believe I'd have to try making music to enter the Otherworld, "listen, I only took recorder lessons for two years in middle school. I can't begin to try—"

"Try, try, try not, the pipe has got a magic song, just play along! You feel it humming in your hand, no need to be part of a band, just blow and press your fingers too and space will now belong to you," he mimed playing a flute, as though I didn't know I needed to do that. Seeing how there was nothing to lose, and time was still running out, I placed the instrument to my lips, pressed the holes with my fingers and exhaled.

The melody that flowed from the pipe was enchanting, like if all the birds in the forest sang in harmony. My fingers somehow knew when to move, and the air itself seemed excited to hear it play. I found myself in front of the apple tree, though I was certain I'd left it far behind when trying to escape the trickster, and its branches began to sway to the tune. A hollow began to open up in the middle of the tree, expanding so far I would swear it was wider than the trunk itself. The music that came from within the hollow was even more enchanting, and the light that flowed from the portal drew me in. It was warm, but not hot, like a sunny spring day. I began to step into the passage, when Puck's voice broke my trance.

"Now there, you see, I helped you. Me. And when next our two paths shall meet, your heart itself is mine to beat," I looked behind me at where his voice came from, but he was gone, "so now I leave you with a smile, we'll meet again in just a while." His laugh dissipated on the breeze. I felt a cold shiver despite the warmth of the light and my coat.

"Well," I planted my foot on the edge of the hollow, "we've come this far," I stepped through the portal to the Otherworld.

I exited from a gnarled old apple tree. Everything looked the same, but it was all different; the air smelled sweeter, the sun was warmer, life was bursting from every direction. I followed the singing, putting the flute in one of my coat's interior pockets. Climbing over a small hill, I caught a glimpse of them: a massive group of spirits and faeries spread out within a wide clearing, surrounding a great hazel coppice that towered over everything else in sight.

And there, in the middle of the revelers, wearing a grass green leine dress that perfectly matched her eyes, with a small silver circlet, that used to be a binding collar, nestled in her reddish-gold hair, was Rel. I ran down the hill, pushing my way through the crowd. For some reason, my voice wouldn't work, so I had to rely on my eyes to convey my urgency. It didn't work. The third person I ran into caught hold of me in a steely grip, and the music stopped.

Along with the music, my temporary mute-ness also ended, and I began yelling her name. The revelers began crowding around me, and I could see by the looks on their faces that they weren't pleased in the least by the interloping human on one of their most sacred festivals. I didn't care; I kept calling her name until my voice cut out again.

"And who, may I ask, are you?" the woman who held onto my left shoulder like a vice growled. I've met demons with less intimidating voices. For some reason, I could feel my name bubbling out of my throat before I could stop myself.

"Nathaniel Faust," but my voice cut off before I could explain why I was there. The assembled spirits started murmuring amongst each other, I could hear my name spreading across the clearing. A bearded man stepped out from the crowd.

"Na-tha-ni-el Faust," he emphasized every syllable of my name, like a kindergartner just learning to read, "do you mean the Nathaniel Faust who killed Aoife? Who decimated the remaining Fianna clan? Who stole the nuts of wisdom?" He spat in my face with each accusation.

"Yes," my voice again betrayed my control of it, and I was struck by my accuser and thrown down by my captor. They began to stomp on me, sit on me. Some younger ones jumped on my back. The murmurs picked up in speed and volume, swirling like the music from before.

"I heard he once drowned a king in air."

"I heard he eats nothing but the meat of legendary creatures."

"I heard he—"

"I heard—"

"Heard—"

"Faust—"

"Bargain—"

"Nathaniel?" a voice rang out over the din. Clear and smooth as snowmelt crystal. I wanted to scream her name, but my voice still didn't work. It probably wouldn't have helped anyways; even she couldn't force all of them to leave me alone. I tried curling up, but my tormentors kept me flat on my stomach. Someone was pulling my hair, while a little boy with a twisted sneer tried to poke my eyes with a stick. It was over. I'd come halfway across the globe and into another dimension just to lose. I imagined Puck's voice telling me to get up.

The pressure on my back suddenly stopped. It really DID sound like the tricky sprite was telling me to get up. I raised my head slightly.

"Now, my friend, this is a mess. Whyever did you tell them 'yes?'" I opened my eyes, half expecting to be poked by that little boy. What I saw instead was beyond belief. There he was, my friend from the forest, but wearing a rich wool robe of many colors, reds, greens, purples, and yellows, with golden jewelry on all his fingers, a golden torc around his neck and a golden crown on his head. There were blue whorls painted on his face and arms, as well, but even so, it was still that trickster.

"Puck?" I was able to speak on purpose again, though my voice was weak from the pain. He let out a round of infectious laughter like in the forest, and my pain started to abate. That was when I noticed her.

Rel stood next to him, and their eyes and hair were so similar, like father and daughter. But... Rel's father was human. She was only half-faerie, and, though she never talked about her parents, whenever she dreamt about her father the house shook me awake, telling me to comfort her. The things she said in those nightmares are things no daughter should ever have to say to her father.

"I must confess, good sir, that I, in telling you my name, did lie. For I'm the one who guides men here, none other than Manannán Mac Lir," the name hit like a ton of bricks.

"Nathanie', arr ye okey?" hearing Rel's voice, I realized none of the other spirits spoke with a particularly strong Irish accent. She must've picked it up from her dad. She knelt down and looked at me with the same concerned expression as when I'd left to fight the demonic rams. Each second I felt her gaze, my body recovered more and more.

"You," I coughed, my lungs still ached slightly from being jumped on, "you were gonna miss the broadcast." She pulled me into a hug.

"Ye followed me all th' way her' for tha'?" she whispered. Her touch poured healing energies into my body, my bruises faded and my breathing became easy.

"Well, I was going to make bonnachs, honey tarts, and colcannon. You can't eat those by yourself," I hugged her back, and started pushing us off the ground.

"Ye know I'm th' behr cook of th' two us, yeh?" she giggled.

"Hey! Last year you loved my St. Bridget's feast! And you're always too busy listening to the radio to cook anyways!" I dusted my slacks and her dress off, but the ground here wasn't very dirty anyways.

"Thar happens be a thing calle' 'preparin' befarhan,'" she giggled again. I was about to defend my cooking again when I was cut off by an overly gleeful voice.

"Well then, good things all around, but what's wrong, friends? There's nary a sound! Make haste for the wedding, the altar's all set, for you owe me a favor, and that's what I'll get," the spirit who used to be Puck roused the crowd into action. Until he'd spoken to them, they'd been hovering ill at ease around our little trio, like if they'd even breathed too hard they'd have been punished harshly.

"Wait, wedding?!" It had taken a moment to process his rhyme. The last time I'd been thrust into a wedding as repayment for a favor, I'd ended up eviscerating the justice of the peace and throwing myself into a stained glass depiction of Judas being eaten by Satan.

"Ye mean ye don' even know why we're here?" Rel apparently knew about the wedding beforehand.

"We're' here because I came to take you home. There's no 'wedding' that we need to attend, Rel, let's go," she dropped my hand as I moved back the way I'd come, "Rel?" I turned back towards her, expecting a recurrence of pale tears if this was really something she'd planned on. Instead, she had a half-amused look on her face. She knew I couldn't leave without fulfilling my promise.

"My brothere made a promas of ye, didn' he?" Manannán was her half brother on her mom's side. She'd told him my weakness for dealing in soul contracts.

"But... why a wedding?" not that I would object to marrying her like I did to marrying a slug-like mass (I certainly wouldn't act the same), "why would Puck—err, Manannán, waste his favor on this?"

"If I myself might answer that query, so we may finish things, you're in kind of a hurry," his voice once again seemed to move constantly, and he was nowhere to be seen, "My darling sister

is all alone, while I have a spouse with whom to share my throne, and as mother Ériu always married the king, sweet Réalt here needs a husband and a ring.”

“Wait, your mom is Ériu? Like... the Ériu?!?” The Irish goddess hadn’t been seen since the Tudor conquest of the isle.

“Ya. Dar ol’ mama,” Rel was obviously embarrassed by the revelation. She’d looked more comfortable surrounded by demonic sheep.

“Though mother’s words are known beyond, outside the realm of this here pond. A second part has come to light, which we’ll fulfill before twilight, the soul of her heir must be fully bound, or Éire will nevermore be found.” So Rel wasn’t just the daughter of the goddess. She was her heir! And I thought I was starstruck that time I met Goshō Aoyama.

“Let’s make this quick,” I feigned annoyance as I walked back towards her, pretending to be staring daggers at the ground, “the sunset’s almost over.”

“Well, some gran’ news abou’ tha’: sunse’ in Éire is abou’ five hars befar New Yark.” The house. We’d asked it to migrate to Ireland for the day, so as to pick up the celebration better on the radio. We had to wait about four hours after the end of the sunset before it would even start setting back home. Plenty of time for a wedding.

The crowd parted to make a pathway towards an ancient-looking section of the forest. The blasted trickster waited for us at the end of the line. As we walked down the aisle, my clothes transformed into a formal robe like Manannán wore (though, fortunately, my coat’s enchantments protected it from the transformation), and Rel’s dress shimmered blue. The crowd began to sing again, but this time, instead of the usual Imbolc songs, they were singing hymns of good luck and stories of marriage. At the edge of the forest was a great oak tree; not as great as the hazel in the middle of the clearing, but still beyond any oak found on Earth.

Manannán held a ribbon—a handfasting contract. Not binding for marriage, necessarily, but binding for most any oath or business.

“Left hand, Rel?” I asked, holding up the pentagram on my right palm. She nodded, and her brother tied the ribbon around our entwined hands. I could feel the magic rolling off from the ribbon. I knew I should’ve objected to this particular part of the ceremony. The ribbon glowed and dissolved. Our souls were united, now for our hearts.

The crowd shifted again, making a new aisle, this time leading to the hazel tree. I hadn’t noticed earlier, but it was surrounded by a small pond. Two small stones at the edge of the pond had claddagh rings on them. We exchanged them, placing them on each other’s left ring fingers, with the crest facing out. Now our hearts were joined. Lastly, our bodies. I picked up the stone that my ring had been on.

“Til death shall we part, huh?” I joked, tossing the little stone into the pond.

“Aye,” Rel answered, tossing her own rock into the water, “til the end of forever,” the crowd erupted into cheers, as though it hadn’t just half an hour before been trying to kill me. All the “guests” tossed pebbles of their own into the pool, blessing us in our new life together. I looked at my wife.

“You’re as beautiful as the day we met,” I whispered. Then I realized my mistake.

“Sorry, but ye mean in tha’ Spanish bastar’s dungeo’, wherr I’d been lacked far hundreds a’ yars an’ farced ta make tha famile rich an’ halthe?”

“Uhh... I meant after that,” I tried to recover from my blunder, “after you bathed in the sacred spring.”

“I know, I was jus’ jaken.” She laughed. All of a sudden, she stumbled. The ground started to quake, the sky started to redden. My hand burned. She clutched hers as well.

"Well, well, well, well, well," a cruel, posh voice, the opposite of Manannán's, echoed throughout the forest, "congratulations, pet. You've brought home a partner."

"Go back to hell, you bastard!" I yelled at the Devil, "you own me, but you have no claim on her."

"Mmm.... but I do; a union of souls is a union, not a coupling. You should've taken better precautions," he let out a cruel laugh, "oh, but do enjoy the gift. My personal brand."

His presence faded and the world brightened again, but the party was essentially over. I checked Rel's hand, but there was no mark, not even a rash-like one.

"I'm fine, see?" she waved it around, gloving her fingers around and snapping them to prove her palm felt normal. I wasn't convinced, but I couldn't very well make a scene (again). We went to her brother's throne to say goodbye.

"Farewell, my kin, be safe, no sin. That beast's foulness will then plague you less. Little brother, care for her and be careful yourself! If you have any respect for this old wise elf," he suddenly became serious in a way he hadn't even during the ceremony, "and so long as I may, I've a fortune today. My prophecy for you: beware further ado." Mist swirled around us all of a sudden, and we found ourselves on the street in front of our house.

"Well, missus Faust, would you care for some chocolate?"

"Tha' I would, mistar Faust. Tha' I would indeed," she kissed me, and we headed inside the gate.

*That CAN'T be the full prophecy, can it? I wondered. There's always "further ado..." On the hall table was a bottle of red liquid, with a five pointed star on the label, and a card with the words **Absinthe Makes the Heart Grow Fonder** *